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Change Over Time in the Grammar of African American English

Sabriya Fisher
Wellesley College

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of 'ain't' in past tense contexts in African American English (AAE) using a corpus of recorded speech collected in Philadelphia in the early 1980s. A study of 42 speakers' rates of use of 'ain't' in past tense contexts finds increase toward 'ain't' in both real and apparent time. This increase is stronger among speakers born and raised in Philadelphia compared to those who migrated there from the South, supporting previous work linking innovation in AAE to linguistic segregation in the urban North during the Great Migration. Finally, this paper uses data from the morphological form of verbs following 'ain't' in past and perfect contexts to argue that the use of 'ain't' for 'didn't' resulted from the reanalysis of present perfect constructions containing 'ain't'.

Change Over Time in the Grammar of African American English

Sabriya Fisher*

1 Introduction

This paper investigates the use of *ain't* in past tense contexts in African American English [AAE]. The study presented here draws on data from 42 speakers in a corpus of recorded speech collected in Philadelphia's Black community in the early 1980s as part of the Influence of Urban Minorities on Linguistic Change Project [UMLC].

The use of *ain't* for *didn't* is considered a distinctive feature of AAE (Labov et al. 1968). It is also hypothesized to be a recent innovation (Howe 2005), resulting from linguistic segregation of African Americans in the urban North following the Great Migration (Labov and Harris 1986, Bailey and Maynor 1987, 1989). This paper presents the results of an apparent time study of Philadelphia AAE, which finds that the rate of use of *ain't* in past tense contexts has indeed increased over the course of the twentieth century. This apparent time increase, which is not found in the other grammatical contexts in which *ain't* is used, is stronger among speakers born and raised in Philadelphia as opposed to those who migrated there from the South. Furthermore, comparing apparent time rates to those from earlier varieties of AAE also shows an increase in the use of past tense *ain't* in real time. These findings support previous hypotheses on the development of *ain't* in past tense contexts (Labov and Harris 1986, Howe 2005). Finally, this paper uses data from the morphological form of verbs following *ain't* in past and perfect contexts to argue that the use of *ain't* for *didn't* resulted from the reanalysis of present perfect constructions containing *ain't* (Smith 2015).

2 *Ain't* in African American English

Ain't-negation exists in varieties of English the world over. In most varieties, *ain't* is used in variation with copula *BE*, auxiliary *BE* (in present progressive and periphrastic future contexts), and auxiliary *HAVE* (in present perfect contexts). In AAE, *ain't* is also variably used in the contexts outlined above as demonstrated by the sentences in (1). All examples are taken from the corpus.

- (1) a. I'm still strong. Don't you think I **ain't**! [copula *BE*]
'I'm still strong. Don't you think I'm not!'
b. This equipment **ain't** making me no money. [aux. *BE*, present progressive]
'This equipment isn't making me any money.'
c. But you **ain't** gon read the paper anyway. [aux. *BE*, periphrastic future]
'But you aren't going to read the paper anyway.'
d. I **ain't** never told nobody since I lost it. [aux. *HAVE*, present perfect]
'I haven't ever told anybody since I lost it.'

Additionally, in AAE, *ain't* is used in place of auxiliary *DO* in present tense contexts, primarily preceding the main verb *got(ta)*, as in (2) below.

- (2) I **ain't** even got time for that. I'll talk to you later someday. [aux. *DO*, present tense]
'I don't even got/have time for that.'

In sentences like that in (2), *ain't* varies with *don't* in AAE rather than with *haven't* as in other English varieties.¹ The use of *ain't* in present tense contexts with main verbs other than *got* is re-

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ported in some of the literature (Howe 2005). However, few unequivocal cases of *ain't*–*don't* variation with other main verbs are found in the UMLC corpus (N=2).

In contrast, the use of *ain't* in simple past contexts, where *didn't* would otherwise be used, is widely reported in the literature (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold and Wolfram 1970, Weldon 1994, Howe 2005).

- (3) I **ain't** say I forgot it. I said I **didn't** think right. [aux. *DO*, past tense]
'I **didn't** say I forgot it. I said I **didn't** think right.'

The use of *ain't* in contexts of auxiliary *DO* is considered a unique feature of AAE, particularly in past tense contexts. Studies on the use of *ain't* in the past tense in AAE have found patterns of age stratification associated with language change. For these reasons, it is often thought to be a recent development in AAE. For example, Howe (2005) compared four early varieties of AAE (the Ex-Slave Recordings, the Virginian Narratives, African Nova Scotia English, and Samaná English) to three contemporary urban ones (in Harlem, Philadelphia, and Columbus, OH).² His comparison revealed a sizeable distinction in rates of use for *ain't* in past contexts between the early and contemporary varieties: community rates of *ain't* reached 6% among the early varieties and 20–60% among the contemporary varieties. Based on this real time data, Howe concludes that the use of *ain't* in contexts of *didn't* has increased during the twentieth century. Additionally, two of the studies of contemporary urban varieties find stratification by age as well. Labov et al. (1968) find a peak in adolescent speakers' use of *ain't* compared to pre-adolescents, and Ash and Myhill (1986) find that adolescents use *ain't* more frequently than adults among speakers with limited contact outside of the Black community.

Explanations for the twentieth century increase in a unique feature of AAE like *ain't* for *didn't* center on two population movements that took place during that time: *the Great Migration* and *White Flight* (Labov and Harris 1986, Bailey and Maynor 1987). During the Great Migration, African Americans left the rural South for the urban North where they settled in city centers. This prompted the movement of White residents from the city centers to the suburbs. This *de facto* residential segregation, which increased substantially over the course of the twentieth century (Massey 2001), led to a high degree of linguistic segregation in the urban North. These circumstances form the basis of the "Divergence Hypothesis," or the idea that Black and White vernacular speech became and is still becoming more and more differentiated, especially among the lower classes, due to residential and linguistic segregation (Labov and Harris 1986, Bailey and Maynor 1987).

Indeed, several distinctive features of AAE are shown to have developed during the same time period. For example, Bailey and Maynor (1987, 1989) show that the use of invariant *be* developed an aspectual function among urban teens and adolescents in Texas that differed from uses of *be* among older adults. Likewise, Cukor-Avila and Bailey (1995) demonstrate the grammaticalization of both invariant *be* and *had* + past (formerly the pluperfect) between four generations of African Americans, also in Texas.³ In both sets of studies, apparent time analyses were complemented by real time studies using data from the Ex-Slave Recordings (Bailey et al. 1991a). Additionally, the semantic and syntactic distribution of the feature under study narrowed in successive generations. Invariant *be* was increasingly restricted to V-ing contexts with the function of a habitual marker, and *had* + past went from conveying pluperfect meaning to denoting past tense meaning in narrative orientation clauses and beyond.

This paper examines whether similar patterns of use are found for past tense *ain't* in a corpus of speech from African Americans in Philadelphia in the early 1980s. First, apparent time analysis

¹According to Howe 2005, *got* was categorically negated by *ain't* in present perfect contexts where it functioned as a levelled participle. Because *got* also came to function as a main verb in place of *have*, *ain't* + *got* sequences were reanalyzed as expressing present tense meaning. The prevalence of *don't*-levelling in present tense contexts in AAE allowed *ain't* to be interpreted as varying with *don't* when *got* functioned as a main verb.

²In Howe's (2005) study, the Ex-Slave Recordings (speakers born 1844–61) and the Virginian Narratives (data collected in the 1930s) represent earlier varieties of AAE. African Nova Scotia English (speakers born 1902–37) and Samaná English (speakers born 1895–1910) represent conservative varieties of AAE.

³Rickford and Théberge-Rafal (1996) further explore the innovative use of preterit *had* among pre-adolescents in East Palo Alto, California.

is used to study changes in individual speakers' and the community's use of the variable over time. These results are compared to real time data from the Ex-Slave Recordings as reported in Myhill 1995 and Howe 2005. Furthermore, because *ain't* is a well-established variant occurring in multiple grammatical contexts, it offers the opportunity to compare rates over time in these contexts (e.g., the present progressive, present perfect, etc.) to rates in the past tense. Then, to test the Divergence Hypothesis, this paper examines whether differences can be found between speakers born and raised in the South who later migrated to Philadelphia and those born and raised in Philadelphia. Finally, sentences containing past tense *ain't* are briefly looked at for signs of increasing semantic or syntactic specificity.

Ultimately, the data analyzed in this paper support the hypothesis that the use of *ain't* in past-tense contexts has increased over time among residents born and raised in the urban North. It further suggests that the use of *ain't* in place of *didn't* resulted from reanalysis of *ain't* in present perfect contexts.

3 Methods

3.1 Data

The data used in this study comes from a corpus of casual conversations collected as part of the Influence of Urban Minorities on Linguistic Change Project [UMLC] from 1981–1984.⁴ The sample used in this study represents a diversity of African American experiences in the city, including speakers who live, work, and interact primarily with other Black speakers on a daily basis as well as those with more contact with the White community. The conversations were recorded by Wendell A. Harris, a member of Philadelphia's Black community, then in his early 30s. A large portion of the recordings were made with members of Harris's own social network. For that reason, these conversations are representative of a more vernacular variety of AAE (Baugh 1983, Ash and Myhill 1986, Labov 2014).

I analyze data from 42 speakers who grew up in either Philadelphia or the South. Years of birth for the 42 speakers range from 1901 to 1969, representing 68 years of apparent time data. The sample is roughly split between speakers under 30 years old (N=20 speakers) and those 30 and older (N=22 speakers). The sample is slightly imbalanced for gender and region of origin. Though there are 13 speakers who identify as female and 29 as male, most adolescent speakers are female and most speakers over 20 years old are male. Similarly, only eight of the 42 speakers grew up in the South.

3.2 Analysis

The main analysis carried out is of use of *ain't* in past tense contexts. All tokens of negation in sentences conveying past tense meaning and followed by a verb were extracted from recordings of the 42 speakers. Any token that possessed an initial consonant [d] was coded as *didn't*. Only tokens that contained an initial diphthongal vowel [ɛɪ] [eɪ] were coded as *ain't*. This extraction produced 888 tokens of past tense negation (i.e., *ain't* or *didn't*).⁵

Rate of use for past tense negation for each speaker across their recording(s) was calculated as $\%ain't = \text{ain't tokens} / (\text{ain't} + \text{didn't tokens})$. Each speaker's rate of *ain't* in this context was then plotted according to their birth year in keeping with the apparent time paradigm (Bailey et al.

⁴The UMLC Project resulted in recordings of more than sixty Philadelphians and four published articles on African American speech: Labov and Harris 1986, Myhill and Harris 1986, Ash and Myhill 1986, and Graff, Labov, and Harris 1986. The data used here overlaps with that used in these previous studies. Of the 42 speakers studied in this paper, 13 are identifiable as having been included in the 1986 analyses. Ash and Myhill 1986 in particular looked at speakers' rates of use of *ain't* in the past tense by their degree of inter-ethnic contact. However, the results reported in that article do not reflect individual rates of use nor other aspects of the linguistic and social context of the variable.

⁵Sentences negated by *did not* were excluded from the envelope of variation as full auxiliaries are used for emphasis in AAE (Green 2002). Sentences where speakers uttered an "intermediate" form such as [ɪnt] were also excluded from the envelope of variation because it was impossible to distinguish whether they were truncated forms of *didn't* or *ain't* (N=51).

1991b). Speaker averages were then used to fit a linear model predicting *ain't* frequency from birth year and birth year squared.⁶

Each speaker's rate of use for past tense negation was also compared to their rate of use for *ain't* in other grammatical contexts. To undertake this analysis, tokens of negation in sentences conveying copular, present progressive, periphrastic future, present perfect, and present tense meaning were also extracted from recordings of the 42 speakers. Token counts for all environments are shown in Table 1.

Semantic Category	Token Count	Auxiliary Variants	Main Verb Morphology
Copula	380	<i>ain't, isn't, aren't, 's not, 're not</i>	Non-verbal predicate
Pres. Prog.	172	<i>ain't, isn't, aren't, 's not, 're not</i>	V-ing
Periph. Future	143	<i>ain't, isn't, aren't, 's not, 're not</i>	gon(na)
Pres. Perfect	98	<i>ain't, hasn't, haven't</i>	V-ed or V-en
Pres. (before got)	113	<i>ain't, don't</i>	got
Past	888	<i>ain't, didn't</i>	V-Ø or V-ed

Table 1: Grammatical contexts in which *ain't* is used in AAE.

In most cases, the verbal complement following *ain't* distinguished one context from another. In the case of the past and present perfect, this was not the case. As a result, the present perfect and simple past were distinguished by the discourse context (i.e., whether the utterance was situated within a narrative or other sequence of events, whether the narrative described a past or currently existing situation, etc.). Other tense/aspect cues within the sentence or surrounding discourse (most notably temporal expressions conveying either past (e.g., *last year*) or present meaning (e.g., *up until now*)) were also considered. Still, there were a number of ambiguous cases where the semantic content could not be reliably discerned (N=32). These cases were not included in the analysis (but see Section 5).

The rate of use for *ain't* in each of these grammatical environments was calculated as $\%ain't = ain't / (ain't + \text{other variants})$. Speakers are plotted in apparent time by their rate of use across all five non-past contexts due to low token counts in the individual grammatical environments. Speaker averages are then used to fit a linear model predicting *ain't* frequency from birth year. The results are ultimately compared to the apparent time results for use of *ain't* in the past tense.

4 Results

Results of the apparent time analysis demonstrate an increase in the use of *ain't* in past tense contexts during the twentieth century, with speakers born prior to 1940 showing rates of use similar to early varieties of AAE. Additionally, there is differentiation by region, with speakers born and raised in the South using *didn't* at higher rates than those born and raised in Philadelphia. Finally, the pattern of increase in apparent time for use of *ain't* in past tense contexts contrasts with that for *ain't* in other grammatical contexts, which show stability over time. These results strengthen the hypothesis that the use of *ain't* instead of *didn't* is a twentieth century innovation in AAE.

4.1 Increase in Past Tense Contexts

Figure 1 below plots individual speakers' rates of use for *ain't* in past contexts (y-axis) by birth year (x-axis) for 37 of the 42 speakers. The 5 speakers with fewer than 10 past tense tokens were set aside for this analysis. Each point in the figure represents the frequency for one speaker; the

⁶A term for birth year squared was included in the linear regression to avoid the regression line dipping below 0 in apparent time (indicating negative rates of use for older speakers). *P*-values for the linear regression with and without the term for birth year squared were negligibly different. This term was not included when mapping rates of use in other grammatical categories, which did not risk dipping below the x-axis.

size of each point represents the token counts on which that particular speaker's frequency of use was calculated.⁷

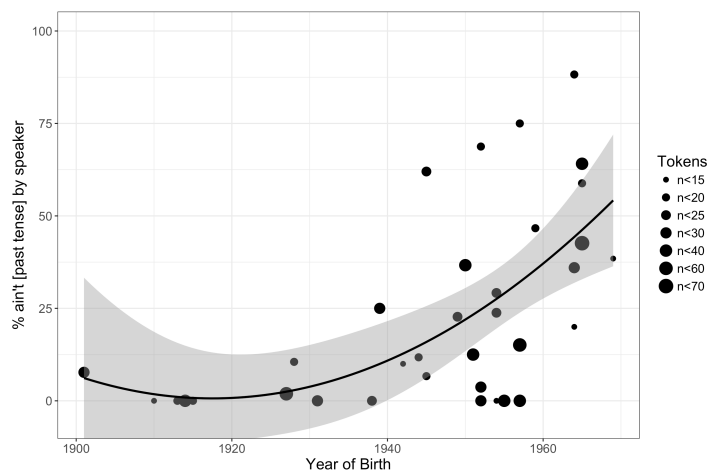


Figure 1: Increase of *ain't* in past tense contexts in apparent time for 37 speakers ($p < 0.001$ in a linear regression).

A linear regression of the frequency of past tense *ain't* by birth year (using a quadratic term) is significant at $p < 0.001$. This result confirms an age effect for the use of *ain't* in past tense contexts whereby younger speakers use *ain't* at higher frequencies. Thus, Figure 1 demonstrates an increase in apparent time for this variable.⁸

Importantly, most speakers born prior to 1940 have rates of use below 11% with many using *ain't* 0% of the time.⁹ This is similar to the rates of use among speakers of early AAE. For example, the community rate of use for *ain't* in the four varieties ranges from 2% to 6%. If the early varieties of AAE can in fact serve as examples of real time data, this pattern indicates a period of low level variation for *ain't* use in past contexts that increased dramatically after 1940. This data is not without limitations, however. For one, speakers in the Ex-Slave Recordings are randomly distributed in terms of region, with the majority hailing from Texas or Alabama (Myhill 1995). It is also possible that these recordings do not fully represent vernacular speech like the UMLC corpus does. Furthermore, all of the studies that make up the combined corpus of early varieties of AAE focused on older speakers. Therefore, there is no opportunity to compare the linguistic behavior of older speakers with adolescents at the time. In sum, real time data from a current synchronic study of Philadelphia AAE would be instrumental in shedding further light on the development of this variable over time.

4.2 Region of Origin

A logical conclusion to draw from the Divergence Hypothesis is that differences in use of the unique features of AAE should be found between speakers who were raised in the South compared to those raised in the North during the time of change. Indeed, Wolfram (2004) finds that *ain't* in

⁷Speakers with the same frequency of use are not distinguishable in Figure 1 if they also have the same birth year; their points are overlaid. This property of the visual data does not affect the statistical analysis.

⁸Frequently, situations of change exhibit a class or gender pattern indicative of the social profile of the change and the way in which it is spreading through the community (Labov 2001). In this sample of data, there is no gender differentiation: men and woman use the variable at roughly equal rates over time. There is, however, an effect for level of education and negative concord, indicating class and stylistic stratification: speakers with less education use *ain't* more frequently and all speakers use it more frequently in stylistic contexts where negative concord is also used. This is unsurprising given the status of *ain't* as the vernacular past tense variant.

⁹One speaker born in 1939, who happens to be Harris' older brother, reaches 25%.

the past tense is used infrequently in rural, Southern AAE during the period of the Great Migration. Consequently, this sub-section investigates region of origin with respect to the use of *ain't* in past tense contexts.

The 42 speakers examined in this study were classified as either originating from Philadelphia or the South according to the region they lived in between the ages of roughly five and 18. Southern speakers came from South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, or Virginia, in keeping with demographics for Southern migration to Philadelphia during the 1900s (Kopf 2016). There are seven speakers from the South with token counts that allow for frequency calculations. Figure 2 shows two separate regression lines for speaker frequency of *ain't* by birth year for each region of origin.

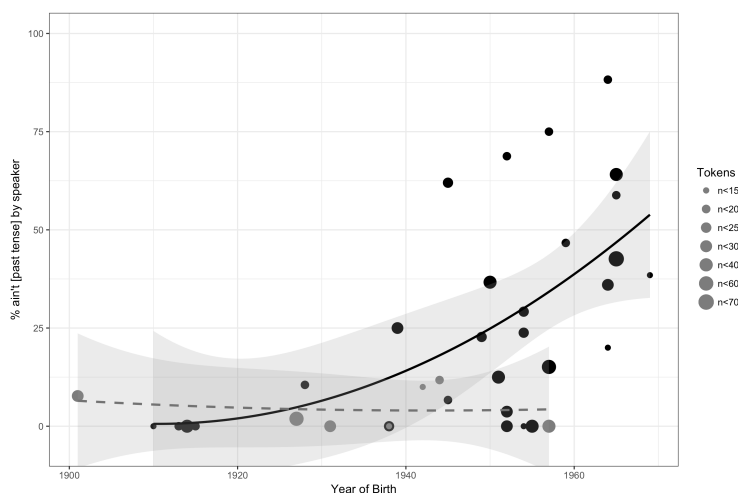


Figure 2: Frequency of use of *ain't* in the past tense by region of origin (Philadelphia = black, South = gray) in apparent time.

Though the number of Southern speakers in this data sample is small, they do provide insight into possible differences in the use of the variable according to region of origin. Overall, Southern speakers use *ain't* in the past tense at lower rates than Philadelphians, regardless of age. This result is thus in keeping with the idea of *ain't* as an innovation that arose among urban Northern residents during the period of the Great Migration. Nonetheless, due to the low number of speakers from the South, this is an area to be further developed in future research.

4.3 Stability in Non-Past Contexts

An increase in use for a particular variant in apparent time does not always indicate generational language change (Fasold et al. 1987). In particular, use of vernacular or innovative variants often shows age grading, forming a peak in adolescence that results in an age stratified pattern in apparent time (Rickford and Price 2013). Still, there are other potential indicators of change in the apparent time data that can be added to the real time comparison with early varieties of AAE. For one, there is change in the overall community rate of use without adolescents. When speakers under 20 years old are removed from the data, a linear regression with quadratic term still shows that age is a significant predictor of the use of *ain't* in the expected direction at $p < 0.05$ (for 29 speakers). This result indicates that there is slight change over time in the general community despite elevated rates from adolescents.

A study of *ain't* also provides the unique opportunity to examine its use in apparent time in other grammatical contexts. If the high rate of use among adolescents is due to an age grading effect for vernacular *ain't*, then this pattern should be seen in other contexts as well. Rates of use were calculated for 26 of the 42 speakers in the overall sample who used more than 10 tokens of *ain't* across the five combined contexts. Figure 3 shows that there is no change over time in the use of *ain't* in non-past grammatical environments, in contrast to the results from past tense environments.

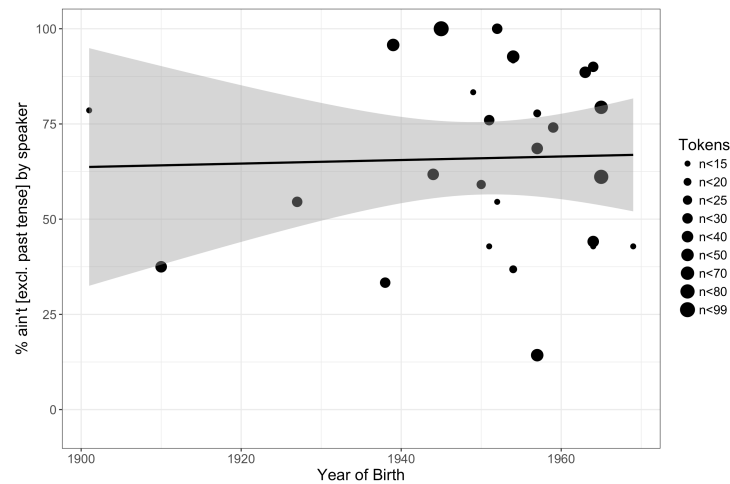


Figure 3: Stability in use of *ain't* across 5 (combined) grammatical environments in apparent time for 26 speakers ($p > 0.05$ in a linear regression).

To confirm that the frequency for the combined categories is not masking any apparent time differences in the individual grammatical environments, the rates of *ain't* in each context was examined by age. To compensate for the lack of data for individual speakers in each context, age was divided into two cohorts (younger than 30, and 30 and older). The results are shown in Figure 4 below, which further demonstrate that there is no change in apparent time for the use of *ain't* in non-past contexts. Interestingly, the rates in individual grammatical contexts are similar to those found in earlier varieties of AAE (Howe 2005).

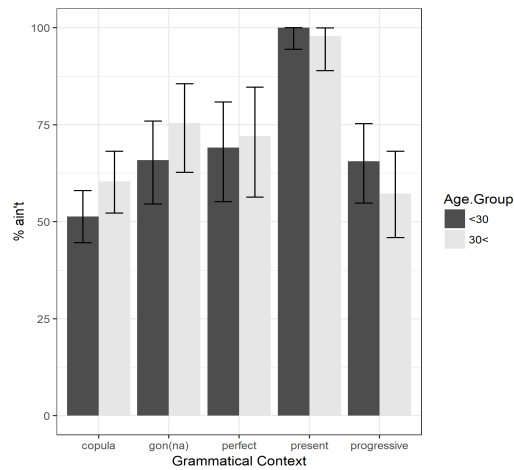


Figure 4: Stability in use of *ain't* across 5 grammatical environments in apparent time for all 42 speakers divided into two age cohorts (older than and younger than 30). There is no age differentiation within grammatical contexts.

Unlike in past contexts, non-past contexts show a pattern for gender-by-age. Age is again divided into the two age cohorts. Figure 5 shows that women consistently use *ain't* significantly less than men in non-past contexts. This pattern holds over age cohorts, lining up with the gender-by-age pattern for stable sociolinguistic variables, where women typically use the more vernacular variant at lower rates than men (Labov 2001). There is no significant difference between older and younger women, nor between older and younger men.

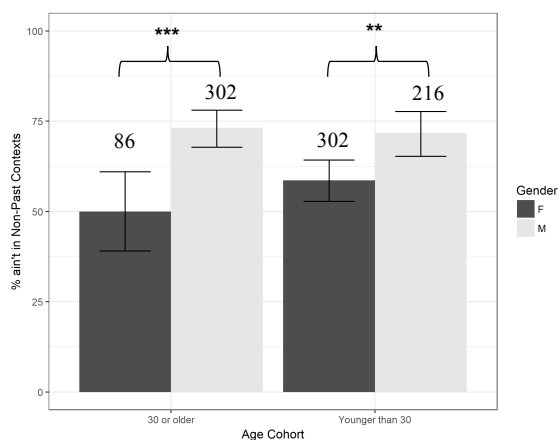


Figure 5: Use of *ain't* in non-past grammatical contexts by age and gender. Token counts for each gender-by-age cohort are shown. *P*-values from chi-squared tests within age cohorts show gender stratification.

To summarize, it appears that use of *ain't* is increasing in past tense contexts but is stable in other grammatical contexts in apparent time. As a result, there is greater divergence between rates of *ain't* in past tense contexts vs. other grammatical contexts for older speakers than there is for younger speakers.¹⁰ For example, “Mr. Valentine” (born in 1901) uses *ain't* in non-past contexts 79% of the time, but uses *ain't* for *didn't* only 8% of the time. In contrast, “Gwen” (born in 1957) uses *ain't* in the past tense just as much as she does in other contexts (78–75%). In brief, change in the past tense context is also signified by the fact that younger speakers have integrated the past tense use of *ain't* into their grammars, using *ain't* at the same rate there as they would in non-past contexts.

5 Grammatical Change in AAE

To summarize the findings of this study, change in apparent time was found for the use of *ain't* in past tense contexts, but not in other grammatical contexts. While rates of use for speakers born prior to 1940 are below 11%, similar to the low levels found in early varieties of AAE, speakers born after 1940 show a greater range of rates, with some speakers using *ain't* between 60–90% of the time in their recordings. A modest difference between speaker behavior based on whether they were born and raised in Philadelphia or the South was also uncovered. These findings point to *ain't* being a recent innovation in AAE and support the premise of the Divergence Hypothesis.

In the other cases of twentieth century innovation in AAE (invariant *be*, *had* + past), the semantic and syntactic distribution of the feature changed over successive generations. This paper argues that the same narrowing of syntax and semantics may have taken place in the case of *ain't* as well. I hypothesize that the use of *ain't* in past tense contexts resulted from a reanalysis of the present perfect use of *ain't*.¹¹ For one, the development of a construction conveying past tense meaning from one originally denoting perfect meaning is a common diachronic pathway across languages (Comrie 1976, Bybee and Dahl 1989). Perhaps for that reason, there is a high degree of semantic overlap between the simple past tense and present perfect aspect (Elsness 1997). Recall the tokens of *ain't* in sentences that were ambiguous between past tense and present perfect meaning. Interestingly, the reanalysis of the pluperfect construction *had* + *V-ed* as a construction conveying past tense is an example of this development already present in AAE.

In the UMLC corpus, there is some evidence supporting this development in the morphological form of verbs following *ain't* in both past and present perfect contexts. In present perfect con-

¹⁰In fact, a plot of the difference between speakers' rate of *ain't* in the past tense compared to the rate in other environments shows a sharp decrease in apparent time (significant at $p < 0.05$ in a linear regression).

¹¹Smith 2015 also argues in support of this hypothesis.

texts, verbs appear in preterit or participle form 92% percent of the time (e.g., *gave*, *given*).¹² In the past tense context, verbs appear in base form 75% of the time (e.g., *give*) and in preterit form ~25% of the time (e.g., *gave*). This is in contrast to utterances where either *haven't* or *didn't* is used: following *haven't*, verbs appear in either preterit or participle form 100% of the time, while following *didn't* verbs appear in base form ~100% of the time. Importantly, variation in the form of verbs following *ain't* in past tense contexts is stratified by age. Older speakers, who are predominantly users of *didn't* in past tense contexts, overwhelmingly use a preterit form of the verb following *ain't* (e.g., *ain't gave*). On the other hand, adolescent speakers are more likely to use a base form exclusively (e.g., *ain't give*). There are, of course, several speakers born after 1940 who are variable between a preterit and base form of the verb. These observations are intriguing given that the preferred verbal form following *ain't* in present perfect contexts is the preterit or participle. Thus older speakers, who use *ain't* in past contexts infrequently to start with, use the same construction (*ain't + gave*) to convey both simple past and present perfect meaning.

A change toward *ain't + give* constructions, used variably or categorically by speakers born after 1940, could have been facilitated on analogy with verbal forms following *didn't*. The high degree of T/D-deletion in AAE, which results in homophony between regular base and preterit form verbs ([wɒkt] → [wɒk] for *walked*), could have also played a role. A closer study of verbal forms in earlier varieties of AAE would shed light on the validity of this hypothesis.¹³ Likewise, a re-study of the community would help determine whether this variation in verbal morphology following *ain't* still exists or represents a change that has since gone to completion.

6 Conclusions

In closing, this paper investigated the use of *ain't* in the past tense in AAE using a corpus of recorded speech collected in Philadelphia in the early 1980s. An apparent time study revealed that the rate of *ain't* in past tense contexts has increased for speakers born after 1940. A comparison with real time data from Myhill 1995 and Howe 2005 further showed that speakers of early varieties of AAE used *ain't* in past contexts at rates similar to UMLC corpus speakers born before 1940. Furthermore, the apparent time increase in past tense contexts is not matched in the five non-past contexts in which *ain't* is used. Instead, *ain't* shows stability over time in non-past contexts. Additionally, the apparent time increase in use of *ain't* in the past tense is stronger for speakers born and raised in Philadelphia than for those who migrated to Philly from the South. These findings are in keeping with the hypothesis that the use of *ain't* in past contexts, which is a unique feature of AAE, is a recent innovation that arose in urban Northern settings during the period of the Great Migration. Finally, this paper used data from the morphological form of verbs following *ain't* in past tense and present perfect contexts to argue that use of *ain't* for *didn't* resulted from the reanalysis of present perfect sentences containing *ain't*.

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¹²These categories are collapsed in this study due to wide-spread participle-to-preterit levelling in this variety of AAE.

¹³The two verbs following *ain't* in past tense contexts in Myhill 1995 may be in preterit form. One sentence contains the irregular preterit form *seed*. However, the other contains *ain't read*, where the orthography does not differentiate between base, preterit, or participle form.

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Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences
 Wellesley College
 Wellesley, MA 02481
 sfisher3@wellesley.edu